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Letter

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LETTER

TO

A MEMBER

OF THE

GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF VIRGINIA,

ON THE SUBJECT OF THE

LATE CONSPIRACY

OF THE SLAVES;

WITH

A PROPOSAL

FOR THEIR

COLONIZATION.

Baltimore:

PRINTED BY *BONSAL & NILES.*

1801.

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LETTER, &c.

SIR,

THE ſervices you have more than once rendered your country; the opinions you are known to entertain on domeſtic ſlavery; and above all, the ſacred duty you owe to thoſe who appointed you to the ſtation you now fill, are the conſiderations which induce me to trouble you with this letter. The high importance of the ſubject, and the lively intereſt it excites, are the only apologies I can offer for writing it. By you, I truſt, they will be deemed ſufficient.

YOU muſt have obſerved, ſir, that ſome truths, which their ſelf-evidence and importance have rendered familiar to the mind, are, on this very account, often diſregarded.— Nobody remarks on what every body ſees; and that which we have long known is not likely to impreſs the mind with much force. Of this nature, is the danger ariſing from domeſtic ſlavery. Every man is perſuaded of the reality of this danger; no man denies its magnitude; but his opinion has as little influence

on his conduct, and excites as little emotion in his mind, as the belief of rewards and punishments, in the next world, influences human conduct in this.

It is true, the late extraordinary conſpiracy has ſet the public mind in motion: it has waked thoſe who were aſleep, and wiped the film from the eyes of the blind. The ignorant and the philoſophic agree in conſidering it as an awful alarm of a future danger, which may involve the deareſt intereſts of their country. But theſe apprehenſions are the ſhort-lived creatures of a day: ſuddenly excited, they will as ſuddenly yield to the tempting repoſe of a falſe and fatal ſecurity. Men are blind, lamentably blind, to diſtant evils. As the mole-hill that is near occupies a greater portion of our view then the diſtant mountain, ſo, in the ſcale of human appreciation, the mite of preſent inconvenience outweighs a mighty maſs of that which is remote.

This propenſity is the more to be lamented, as it is always eaſier to prevent than to remedy; and it is ſometimes eaſy to prevent what it becomes afterwards impoſſible to remedy. The overthrow of the Grecian ſtates was forſeen, and might have been averted, by unanimity in their councils. Had the Roman ſenate liſtened to the prophetic warnings of Cato, Cæſar had never trampled on the

liberties of his country. Happy for Virginia, if the guardians of her welfare will act with that wiſdom and deciſion which the occaſion demands, and which they have ſo often diſplayed on leſs ſerious emergencies.

WHILE all agree that our danger is great and certain, various are the opinions of the nature and extent of the remedy to be applied. Some are for palliating what they think admits not of a radical cure; whilſt others, more bold, and perhaps more cautious too, are for laying the axe to the root, and at once extirpating this growing evil. For my part, ſir, I freely confeſs to you, I conſider it as an eating ſore, which will yield only to the knife, or the cauſtic; and that it is far better to ſubmit to the pain of the operation, than to endanger the life of the ſtate. I will lay before you the grounds on which I have formed my opinion.

THERE is often a progreſs in human affairs which may indeed be retarded, but which nothing can arreſt. Moving on with ſlow and ſilent ſteps, it is marked only by comparing diſtant periods. The cauſes which produce it are either ſo minute as to be inviſible, or, if preceived, are too numerous and complicated to be ſubject to human controul. Of ſuch ſort is the advancement of knowledge among the negroes of this country. It is ſo ſtriking, as to

be obvious to a man of the moſt ordinary obſervation. Every year adds to the number of thoſe who can read and write; and he who has made any proficiency in letters, becomes a little centre of inſtruction to others. This increaſe of knowledge is the principal agent in evolving the ſpirit we have to fear. The love of freedom, ſir, is an inborn ſentiment, which the God of nature has planted deep in the heart: long may it be kept under by the arbitrary inſtitutions of ſociety; but, at the firſt favourable moment, it ſprings forth, and flouriſhes with a vigour that defies all check. This celeſtial ſpark, which fires the breaſt of the ſavage, which glows in that of the philoſopher, is not extinguiſhed in the boſom of the ſlave. It may be buried in the embers; but it ſtill lives; and the breath of knowledge kindles it into flame. Thus we find, ſir, there never have been ſlaves in any country, who have not ſeized the firſt favorable opportunity to revolt.

In our infant country, where population and wealth increaſe with unexampled rapidity, the progreſs of liberal knowledge is proportionally great. In this vaſt march of the mind, the blacks, who are far behind us, may be ſuppoſed to advance at a pace equal to our own; but, ſir, the fact is, they are likely to advance much faſter. The growth and multiplication of our towns tend a thouſand ways to enlighten and inform them. The very nature of our government, which leads us to

recur perpetually to the diſcuſſion of natural rights, favors ſpeculation and enquiry. By way of marking the prodigious change which a few years has made among this claſs of men, compare the late conſpiracy with the revolt under lord Dunmore. In the one caſe, a few ſolitary individuals flocked to that ſtandard, under which they are ſure to find protection. In the other, they, in a body, of their own accord, combine a plan for aſſerting their claims, and reſt their ſafety on ſucceſs alone. The difference is, that then they ſought freedom merely as a good; now they alſo claim it as a right. This compariſon ſpeaks better than volumes the change I inſiſt upon.

But, ſir, this change is progreſſive. A little while ago their minds were enveloped in the darkeſt ignorance; now the dawn of knowledge is faintly perceived, and warns us of approaching day. Of the multitude of cauſes which tend to enlighten the blacks, I know not one whoſe operation we can materially check. Here, then, is the true picture of our ſituation; nor can we make it leſs hideous by ſhutting our eyes to it. Theſe, our hewers of wood and drawers of water, poſſeſs the phyſical power of doing us miſchief; and are invited to it by motives which ſelf-love dictates, which reaſon juſtifies. Our ſole ſecurity conſiſts, then, in their ignorance of this power, and in their means of uſing it;—a ſecurity which

we have lately found is not to be relied on, and which, ſmall as it now is, every day diminiſhes.

BUT many of thoſe, who ſee and acknowledge this change in the temper and views of the Negroes, aſcribe it principally to the mild treatment they have of late years experienced; and flatter themſelves, that a few cautionary laws, joined to a ſeaſonable rigour, will guard us againſt future danger. The hope is illuſory;—no ſyſtem of rigour can reach the firſt cauſes of the evil;—it cannot even be enforced.

VAIN and nugatory are thoſe laws which are not founded on public opinion: they muſt be grafted on this ſtock to produce good fruit. How many laws in our own code, and in every code under the ſun, for want of this vivifying principle, have come into the world ſtill-born, or expired after a few ſhort and feeble cries. In free countries eſpecially, the operative laws are buoyed up by the great currents of opinion, of faſhion, and intereſt: as theſe ſhift their beds, the laws muſt ſhift with them. But, ſir, you are aware that an immenſe change in the opinions of men has gradually taken place, not only in this country, but in the whole civilized world. I ſpeak not here of the ſpeculations to which the American and French revolutions have given birth (though they were the effects of the ſame great

change;) it is ſufficient for my preſent purpoſe to inſtance the progreſs of humanity. You muſt recollect, ſir, that before the French revolution was even foreſeen, ſocieties were eſtabliſhed to effect the abolition of the ſlave trade: that humane inſtitutions aroſe in every quarter: that the rigour of penal laws was ſoftened in moſt countries; and, in ſome, a foundation was laid for a radical reform: that the Inquiſition had loſt half its terrors, by laying aſide more then half its enormities: that the torture was almoſt totally diſuſed; and, that in every country where there were ſlaves, their treatment was growing milder. In ſhort, a thouſand facts could be adduced to ſhew that a liberal ſpirit had gone forth, and extended itſelf equally to objects of ſcience and humanity. To this ſpirit the ſlave owes the melioration of his condition:—it is not, it never has been, in obedience to municipal regulation, or private convention; but the ſilent work of public opinion, ſhewing itſelf in the free acts of individuals. While the temper, the faſhion, the prejudice of the times (call it by what name you pleaſe) continue to favor this mild treatment, in vain may your laws oppoſe it; for I repeat it, ſir, they muſt breathe the ſame ſpirit as they people the are to act upon, or they die of a lethargy.

THE bare attempt to introduce a ſyſtematic rigour is highly impolitic. Among the ſlaves, it

will excite a deep and general ſenſibility: among their maſters, it can ſerve only to give the pretext of national policy, to excuſe guſt of paſſion, or the free indulgence of cruelty and revenge. Thus, when you make one little tyrant more tyranical, you will make thouſands of ſlaves impatient and vindictive.

But if any project of this ſort could be unanimouſly adopted, it could not afford us any additional ſecurity. By a natural re-action, ſeverity on our part would beget hate on theirs; and this general animoſity will bind in a cloſer band thoſe whom the late conſpiracy has already impreſſed with a ſenſe of common intereſt. Nor would the increaſe of rigour much impede the progreſs of enlightened ſentiments among them. The diſcovery of our fears would neither give them an humbler idea of their own ſtrength, nor make them leſs diſpoſed to improve it. The mere diſpoſition in us to check this improvement would produce a diſpoſition to increaſe it. What is now accident, oppoſition would convert into choice: and what is mere choice would grow into ardent deſire. Nor is it unworthy of notice, that an increaſe of rigour would redouble the activity and the clamours of thoſe heated religioniſts, who have long wanted ſo good an apology for their officious zeal. And among the more ſober friend of theſe wretched bondſmen, commiſſera-

tion would be a lively ſentiment, when this ſhadow of policy would be no longer perceived. It appears, then, that a ſyſtem of rigour is not more impracticable than it would be inadequate and pernicious. I have dwelt more upon this ſcheme of fetters and ſcourges, of deprivations and reſtrictions, becauſe I perceive it is the favorite topic of the day. Without doubt, ſir, the horror which the peculiar atrociouſneſs of the late event ſo naturally excites, gives a tincture of revenge to all our ſchemes of policy. In a ſubject of this moment I acquit you of ſuch extrinſic and unworthy conſiderations.

I fear ſir, I have ſpent too much time in proving what you have already, and more ſatisfactorily, proved to yourſelf. Suffer me however briefly to notice ſome other grounds of apprehenſion, which apply equally to every modification of ſlavery. We have hitherto placed much reliance on the difficulty of their acting in concert. Late experience has ſhewn us, that the difficulty is not inſurmountable. Ignorant and illiterate as they yet are, they have maintained a correſpondence, which, whether we conſider its extent or duration, is truly aſtoniſhing. If their gradual improvement did not continually facilitate communication, the want may be at any time ſupplied by a few deſperate intriguers, or bigoted enthuſiaſts. Fanaticiſm is ſpreading faſt

among the Negroes of this country, and may form in time the connecting link between the black religioniſts and the white. Do you not, already, ſir, diſcover ſomething like a ſympathy between them? It certainly would not be a novelty, in the hiſtory of the world, if Religion were made to ſanctify plots and conſpiracies.

It is thought by ſome, that the negroes we are continually ſending to the ſouthern ſtates, leſſens their proportional number in this ſtate. I believe, ſir, that the migrations of the whites at leaſt balances this decreaſe. Of the multitudes which we meet on all our great roads, ſeeking new homes, to the weſt, or the ſouth, by far the larger part are whites. It has been laid down by theoretical writers, that the natural increaſe of ſlaves is not equal to that of freemen. This, in moſt countries, is true; but in the mild form in which it exiſts in this ſtate, ſlavery favours the multiplication of the ſpecies. Many a black woman is a grandmother, while her fair miſtreſs pines in fruitleſs celibacy. If a female negro is childleſs, it is the fault of nature alone. Certain of ſubſiſtence for herſelf, and her offspring, and equally exempt from the cares of intereſts, or ambition, ſhe yields to the impulſe of love as ſoon as ſhe feels it, while, with us, a thouſand principles and prejudices either delay the commerce of the ſexes, or prevent it altogether. Nor is the

temperate mode of living, of the ſlaves of this country, leſs favourable to a continuation of their kind: equally removed from chilling want and enervating luxury, they uniformly enjoy that golden mean, which is moſt favourable to a due and perfect health. From all theſe conſiderations, I do not heſitate to affirm, that the ratio of blacks to whites is continually increaſing. In ſupport of this poſition, I confidently appeal to the approaching cenſus.

THERE is one argument to which I have not even hinted; but which ſome may think of more weight than any other;—I mean the eaſe whith which they may become the tools of a foreign enemy. Granting that the danger from themſelves is ſlight or remote, this, it muſt be confeſſed, depends upon an event that is altogether uncertain. War is ſometimes inevitable; no human prudence can guard againſt an event that may be brought about by the inſolence, the injuſtice, or the caprice of *any* nation. Whenever we are involved in this calamity, if our enemies hold out the lure of freedom, they will have, in every negro, a decided friend. The paſſage is eaſy from friends to auxiliaries: little addreſs would be neceſſary to excite inſurrection; to put arms into their hands, and to convert a willing multitude into a compact and diſciplined army. Thoſe who did not openly join him would be ſe-

cretly his friends and ſpies. In ſuch a ſituation, as no vigilance could guard us againſt ſurpriſe, ſo neither would any line of conduct ſecure us from danger. Precaution would provoke reſiſtance, and neglect would invite it. In ſhort, ſir, they may be conſidered as a piece of artillery, huge and ſeemingly unmanageable, but which the moſt unſkilful of our enemies may play off againſt us.

If, then our danger is continually increaſing, and the only temporiſing policy, which has been contemplated, is more likely to accelerate than retard its progreſs; let us turn our attention to thoſe remedies which propoſe a perfect cure of the mighty evil. This grand deſideratum can be effected only by emancipation, or tranſportation. I will take a ſhort view of their reſpective merits and practicability.

The moſt zealous advocates for a general emancipation, ſeeing the impoſſibility of amalgamating ſuch diſcordant materials, confeſs the neceſſity of qualifying the gift of freedom, by denying the negroes ſome of the moſt important privileges of a citizen. Conſidering them, then, in this ſubordinate ſtation, the friends of the ſcheme ſay, or may ſay, that men, when admitted to the rights of individual liberty and property, have patiently borne the deprivation of civil rights: That the negroes, with us, would be in

that mean ſtate which is moſt propitious to peace and order; not enough in want of the goods of life, to be turbulent from deſpair; nor poſſeſſing them in ſuch abundance as to be factious from ambition. They may cite the peaſantry of Europe as a ſignal inſtance of this tolerant diſpoſition; ſince *there*, a ſmall part of the community keeps the other from a participation of civil rights, though nature has made not an atom of difference between the two orders; whilſt, *here*, ſhe has ſet a viſible and immutable boundary, which is thought to ſeparate an inferior from a ſuperior claſs. That, excluded from the ownerſhip of lands, and the more honorable occupations of life, they would neceſſarily continue to be what they now are, tradeſmen, labourers, and houſehold ſervants. That inaſmuch as the man who labours for himſelf, will do more work, and do it better, than he who labours for another, the State would gain by the change, though individuals might ſeem to loſe. That thoſe who, by ſuperior induſtry, or frugality, became rich, would form an intermediate claſs, which would be a fence againſt the poſſible enterpriſes of the reſt: and the better to effect a difference of intereſts, that the more wealthy and reputable ſhould be allowed certain political rights; which indulgence would prove, not only a conſiderable prop to the State, but alſo a powerful incitement to honeſt induſtry. In one word, it is ſaid that their privileges and reſtraints

would equally conduce to inſure the public tranquility; ſince the advantages we conceded would make them contented; while thoſe we with-held would make us ſecure.

THIS project, it muſt be confeſſed, has an air of plauſibility, which ſeduces at firſt ſight: But, on cool examination, I am compelled to pronounce it one of thoſe cloſet ſchemes, which do more honor to the heart than to the head. Apt as we are to eſtimate by compariſon, and to prize more highly the little we want, than the much we poſſeſs, it may be fairly inferred, that the negroes, if once emancipated, would never reſt ſatisfied with any thing ſhort of perfect equality. The taſte would but whet their appetite. This growing diſcontent, joined to our conduct towards them, ſtill more contemptuous than unjuſt, would generate a ſecret animoſity, which a foreign enemy would eaſily convert into an open breach. May they not even become the auxiliaries of domeſtic faction; or the fit engine of any artful and enterpriſing leader? In ſhort, this ſcheme ſeems to me to be the offspring of an ingenious philanthropy, rather than of true political wiſdom. Let us, then, turn our attention to the plan of tranſportation.

THE number of Blacks and Mulattoes, in Virgnia, muſt now exceed three hundred thouſand.

Their annual increaſe is little ſhort of fifteen thouſand. The expence of tranſporting to Africa this number alone, at twenty pounds a head, would be a million of dollars; ſo that, at a glance, we ſee that this plan of removal is beyond the reſources of the State. To the Weſt-Indies, if their inhabitants were willing to admit ſo dangerous a body; if the government of the United States would conſent to the cruel exile; if the enlightened legiſlature, of which you are now a member, could ſanctify ſo derogatory a purpoſe; the ſympathy and humanity of individual ſlaveholders would never ſuffer them to be torn from thoſe tender attachments which now ſoften the miſeries of ſervitude, to ſuffer ſtill greater in a foreign land. It then remains to be ſeen, if they can be colonized in ſome part of the American continent. This, I confeſs, is my laſt remaining hope. I know the expence attending its execution; the prejudices of our fellow citizens; and the length of time neceſſary to carry it into beneficial operation. But it muſt be remembered, that we have only a choice of evils; and it is the part of wiſdom to ſelect the leaſt. The following hints I ſubmit to your ſerious and candid conſideration.

THAT application be made to the United States, to procure from the Spaniſh government, or to furniſh from its own territory, ſuch a tract

of country as ſhall be deemed ſufficient for the colony propoſed. The conſideration of future peace would recommend the weſtern ſide of the Miſſiſſipi. Preſent convenience and œconomy would adviſe a purchaſe of ſome part of the Indian country, comprehended within the limits of the ſtate of Georgia.

THAT this colony be under the protection and immediate government of this ſtate, or the United States, until it contained a number of inhabitants ſufficient to manage their own concerns: and that it be excluſively appropriated to the colonization and reſidence of people of colour.

THAT a poll tax be laid on every negro and mulatto, to be collected by officers appointed in each county, who ſhould veſt the money ſo raiſed, in the purchaſe of ſlaves to be ſent at the expence of the ſtate, to the colony. By this arrangement the tax would be more œconomically and advantageouſly managed; and the diminution of ſlaves would be proportioned to the number, in every part of the ſtate.

THAT there be an additional and a heavier tax on all females above the age of puberty; and a bounty on the exportation of every female of any age. To increaſe the effect, the bounty may be reduced by one half, after the age of twenty-five, or thirty.

This part of the plan (which I owe to an ingenious friend) will have a double effect in inducing many to export their female ſlaves: and when a girl under fourteen or fifteen is ſent out of the country, ſix or eight unborn negroes are probably ſent with her. It may be thought unworthy of the laws to encourage this diſhonorable traffic, but the moſt imperious of all laws, that of ſelf-preſervation, authoriſes it. And with us, the power of ſending them out of the country is exerciſed with peculiar moderation and humanity.

That emancipation ſhould be encouraged rather than checked: and the better to induce the voluntary migration of free negroes and mulattoes, every accommodation and indulgence ſhould be ſhewn them in the colony. They ſhould alſo be aſſiſted in removing their perſons and effects; and additional taxes and diſabilities may be impoſed on them here.

If all theſe means united does not diminiſh the number faſter than the natural increaſe, all thoſe born in a year, at ſtated periods, every fifth or ſixth, for example, may be emancipated at a certain age, on condition of their migrating, or paying a ſtipulated ſum.

That a land-office be eſtabliſhed in the colony, to make leaſes of the land, till it would

ſell for a certain price; when it may be diſpoſed of to the new ſettlers, who would be thus induced to invite the migration of others, and to promote whatever would increaſe the value of the land. When we conſider how much this value would be enhanced, by a conſiderable and increaſing population, it is not raſh to ſay, that the difference would conſtitute a fund, adequate to all the expences of the colony, and to all the after purchaſes of ſlaves.

THIS plan, you perceive, is calculated to operate ſlowly; as a rapid decreaſe of the claſs, which conſtitutes the productive labour of the country, is not deſirable. In caſe of a diminution thus gradual, emigrants from the northern ſtates, and from Europe, would as gradually fill the places they would leave, and we ſhould profit by the exchange. Our own habits, too, would accommodate themſelves to our new ſituation. Idleneſs would no longer be the prerogative of a white ſkin; nor would labour be thought unworthy of a free man. The impolicy of planting an enemy on our frontier, as well as the expence attending its execution, may be objected to this plan. As to the expence, the ſettlement may be begun on a moderate ſcale; and when the plan is once in operation, it may be made to work its own way. As an enemy, they could never be formidable, ſince their numbers would be ſmall,

compared with the population of the United States: ſince they would increaſe more ſlowly; and they would be far behind us in information and the arts of life. We may be to them a haughty and domineering neighbour; they never could be terrible to us.

THUS, ſir, have I given you a ſketch of the plan I would propoſe, for ridding the country of an evil, which is not more a corroding canker, than a blemiſh, that deforms one of the faireſt portions of the globe.

YOU muſt have obſerved, Sir, that I ſay nothing of they duty we owe them as creatures made by the ſame hand, and in the ſame mould as ourſelves: I make no appeal to thoſe humane and generous feelings which are the worthieſt the heart can know: I do not remind you, that from they days of Homer, it has been admitted that a ſlave does but half the work of a free man; and conſequently, that no country can attain a great height in manufactures, in commerce, or in agriculture, where one half of the community labours unwillingly, and the other half does not labour at all: I ſay nothing of the baneful effect of domeſtic ſlavery on our moral character, and of its inconſiſtency with the trueſt principles of republicaniſm: I forbear to enlarge all theſe topics, equally copious and important, becauſe they have

been repeatedly diſcuſſed by abler pens than mine; and becauſe I know you have been long ſenſible of their force. I confine myſelf to the firſt of all objects of policy, the ſalvation of the ſtate. May I not hope, Sir, that you are not ſo hurried away by the whirl of active politics as to be unmindful of the perils which environ us? Granting that the danger is diſtant, ſhall we throw on poſterity the burden of accumulated evils we dare not meet in part? But no man can ſay the danger is diſtant. The city which was lately devoted to deſtruction, that very city where you are now deliberating, owes its preſervation to a ſingle individual. If only one of many thouſands was weak enough to betray the cauſe in which he had engaged, or generous enough to be our friend, is it unfair to ſay we may be leſs fortunate on a future occaſion? Or muſt we hold all that is dear to us by ſo precarious a tenure? In ſpite of our utmoſt vigilance and precaution, our quiet will be henceforward interrupted by continual alarms, real or groundleſs. *Qui metuens vivit, liber mihi non erit unquam*, ſays a great maſter of human life; and he ſays truly; for, by a rule of eternal juſtice, the tyrant who lives in fear is himſelf a ſlave.

Let me then conclude this letter, which has already drawn to an unexpected length, by beſeeching you to conſider well this awful criſis in our affairs. It is the legiſlature alone which can

prepare the public mind for the great effort the occaſion demands. If great ſacrifices are to be made, you may ſhew that a great ſtake is depending: if our property is to be taken from us, that our peace, our proſperity, perhaps our very exiſtence is thereby preſerved: if preſent inconveniences are incurred, that they are nothing compared with thoſe we avoid. In fine, Sir, we are embarked on a tempeſtuous ſea, and are ſurrounded by ſhoals and quickſands. Yonder beacon warns us of our danger. If, nevertheleſs, thoſe to whom we have committed the helm, be ignorant or regardleſs of their duty, and we return to our wonted repoſe, we may chance to be waked again, by a ſhock that will barely allow us time to ſee our folly, in one general wreck of property and life.